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FAKE NEWS, ALTERNATIVE FACTS, FICTION, FACTION – CONTESTING THE ‘TRUE’ STORY

ABSTRACT

Relating the phenomenon to the South African context, this article investigates current debates about fake news – especially American (US) insights that covered the rise of Donald Trump. In taking this route, the article provides an exploratory overview of current debates on fake news and the variations that have emerged in South Africa. The article does not aim to provide a detailed content analysis of fake or spoof websites. Rather, the aim is to draw from insights that have emerged from the international debates, and use what is relevant to understand a very specific set of socio-political circumstances. Within this framework, and in the aftermath of misinformation scandals such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the ANC War Room and the Bell-Pottinger smear campaign, the question that is asked is what implications the current debates on fake news have for South Africa. How do we understand these insights in the context of histories of conflict and high inequality? The article concludes that the prominence of fake news could serve to demonstrate mainstream media’s service to a particular ideological position at the expense of others in transitional societies with multiple viewpoints.

Keywords: fake news; Donald Trump; echo chambers; post-truth; War Room; Gupta leaks; Covid-19; pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has again brought the issue of fake news to the fore. Big tech companies such as Google and Facebook have implemented measures to curb its spread and governments, including South Africa, have criminalised the act of misinformation. With the world going into lockdown in March 2020, fake news and conspiracy theories became ubiquitous. Unwittingly or otherwise, people have shared false information on social media to such an extent that the phenomenon has re-emerged in global headlines and made health authorities concerned about its effects on the management on the virus (Grobler 2020). With some arguing that the scourge is due to stupidity and criminality, if not both,

others have taken a more nuanced view. To this end, Eaton (2020) argues that whether appalled or deeply disappointed by the wave of fake news during the crisis, what must be kept in mind is that these conspiracies and false claims are emotional support for frightened people during a time of uncertainty. What people are saying is that they are extremely anxious about the future, where they could become sick or lose their livelihoods, as social systems grind to a halt. So, to ease that anxiety, they take solace in telling themselves that villains made the coronavirus to harm the innocent, and that the old systems will soon run as normal (Eaton 2020).

Eaton's observations help this article narrow its focus to concentrate on the socio-political consequences of misinformation. This narrowing of focus is important because critics have argued that due to its currency, the term "fake news" has become a "magical, all-encompassing phrase to describe a range of things: from patently false clickbait websites to legitimate news publications" (Basson 2016). As such, there has been a call from media observers for practitioners to refrain from referring to misinformation, fabricated facts and erroneous online content and messages as "fake news". The backlash against the term was best captured by the oft-repeated take from the former editor and Director of the SA Press Council, Joe Thloloe: "If it's fake, it's not news" (Basson 2016). According to this perspective, genuine news is based on "factual occurrences, trends or developments that meet certain criteria" (*ibid.*).

In accordance with the above hierarchy of news, Wardle (2017) argues that fake news does not help explain the issues it tries to encapsulate. As such, Wardle (2017) says it is important to distinguish between several variations of disinformation, which include 1) satire or parody; materials which have "no intention to cause harm but have the potential to fool"; 2) imposter content, or the impersonation of genuine sources in comedic material or publications that deceive audiences by pretending to speak on behalf of a real source; 3) fabricated content, classically defined as "fake news", is content that is patently false, and is designed to deceive and harm; and 4) misleading content that portrays information in a skewed and biased manner. This material is carried by publications with strong ideological biases that often publish stories that suit their agendas, confirm their prejudices, or serve as echo chambers.

Therefore, in this "spectrum of wrongfulness", fake news is used to refer to fabricated reports rather than partisan publications or satire (Rousseau 2017). However, despite the stress on nuance and harmful media, Wasserman (2017) contends that the notion of fake news has taken on pejorative meanings that are used to disavow ideological differences. Instead of denouncing fictional accounts, Wasserman (2017) goes on to argue that the current backlash against fake news encompasses a perceived deviance of marginal outlets from dominant norms. In a rapidly changing media environment, fake news is increasingly associated not only with fabricated content, but also with perceptions of social menace. As such, Wasserman (2017) maintains that fake news has become an object of the mainstream media's moral indignation.

Critical media observers assert that in an age of online and social media, where it is harder for mainstream media outlets to control the flow of news, the power of traditional media houses to determine what is credible has been challenged (Stephens 2017;

Carpini 2018). The age of the internet and technological innovation has diminished the control enjoyed by traditional sources who presented themselves as go-to places for “credible news” (Stephens 2017). The previous order has been upended by “dis-intermediating” social media technologies, which have reduced the role of the media as the intermediary between social institutions and the public (Stephens 2017; Carpini 2018). These social changes and the disruption of the traditional mainstream media’s gatekeeping model have been accompanied by a growing sense that social media has made it easier for unverified sources to publish information and thus easier for fake news stories to spread (Lapowsky 2017; Ha 2017).

Wasserman (2017: 2) argues that the stated concerns about fake news can be seen as linked to “pre-existing moral panic about the effects of digital media on democratic politics”. The massive data caches held by online companies, which detail the lives of many, have raised fears of abuse (O’Hagan 2018). Digital companies – as the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal shows – have been criticised for selling user information to political communicators who use it to target specific audiences with tailored messages (Wong 2018). In contravention of the idea of a marketplace of ideas, the danger of the strategy is that the wide berth between population groups, especially online, means that political communication is not posted communally for the public to see. Political operatives have taken advantage of these divisions, using sites such as Facebook to either malign a certain group or broadcast messages that make promises to one group of voters, while simultaneously promising the opposite to a different group (Wong 2018).

Furthermore, the panic about new media technology includes the perception that online news media has a tendency to create “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” (Wasserman 2017). The fear is that social media facilitates a space where people are not exposed to alternative viewpoints. This tunnel vision is caused by the fact that associations online tend to be between people who share similar traits or interests. This means that most online networks largely consist of people who share a broad demographic profile: education level, income, location, ethnic and cultural background, and age (Knight 2018). Algorithms employed by online media companies to organise news feeds narrow associations to people whose worldview align. With an orientation to show less of the content that a person might disagree with, algorithms facilitate the omission of dissenting views and produce agreement between like-minded people.

This bias in curatorship has led many to believe that it is easy for social media, in particular, to fuel unverified reports, rumours and dubious content because of the uniformity of views in echo chambers and an absence of fact-checking mechanisms or editorial filters (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017: 2). Although digital media is seen to amplify the phenomenon of “confirmation bias”, Bakir and McStay (2017: 8) argue that this tendency for people to “interpret, notice, recall and believe information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs” has long been associated with traditional news media. In this regard, Knight (2018) contends that this is the way in which mainstream news media organisations have been operating for some time. Using a gatekeeping model to filter what journalists and editors assume to be what the audience wants to read, mainstream media organisations have relied on subjectivities to determine what

people are interested in (Knight 2018). By doing so, they have narrowed the exposure people have to alternative viewpoints and a variety of news.

Coincidentally, one of the talking points that emerged from insights following the 2016 US elections and the Brexit vote in Britain is that mainstream media has itself become an echo chamber (Frank 2016). After the 2016 presidential election, US media commentators reported that mainstream media were taken aback by Donald Trump's victory because their left-leaning bias disallowed them from seeing beyond their own prism (Schow 2017). An example of this partiality is that almost all the major news publication in America, including *The New York Times*, barely engaged with the Republican constituency, sharply rejected the prospects of a Trump presidency, and formally endorsed Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton (Schow 2017). Furthermore, WikiLeaks revealed that a number of journalists from leading media outlets further insulated themselves by coordinating with the Clinton Campaign and attended private parties with her campaign staff (Greenwald & Fang 2016). Due to such close ties, mainstream media propped up Clinton's candidacy, with her receiving disproportionately biased coverage in the primaries and general election (Sainato 2017).

In addition to overtly favouring Clinton, mainstream media's election coverage stands accused of delegitimising Bernie Sanders' campaign, and obsessing over the illegitimacy of Donald Trump (Sainato 2017). Although most of this coverage was negative, news organisations reported that Trump received about \$2 billion in free media coverage, nearly six times more than Bernie Sanders (Calderone 2016). Critics maintained that the goal of most of the coverage Trump received was to prop up an unfavourable or "weak" general election opponent for Clinton to face, and subsequently to beat her (Sainato 2017). Judging from the standpoint of Trump's victory, this strategy ultimately backfired. Reports reflect that the mainstream media's negative coverage of Trump fueled resentment toward traditional powers – a structure in which corporate-owned mainstream media is seen as an "establishment arm used to protect the power of the top 1% rather than challenge it" (Sainato 2017).

Maines (2017) argues that Trump won precisely because he characterised the media as being part of a "corrupt establishment". Furthermore, Maines (2017) posits that after decades of peddling the "soft bias" of American-style liberalism, the mainstream media positively invited pushback from a far-right and right-of-centre media. The mutual disdain between the left and right wing in the 2016 presidential election campaign manifested itself in an anti and pro-Trump bias that flouted journalistic convention. Schow (2017) argues that during this time, any negative story about Trump was published with minimal vetting on the left, and the same applied for positive stories on the right. As such, the consistent efforts by the mainstream media to manufacture outrage against Trump, and failure to thoroughly assess Clinton's weaknesses, effectively desensitised millions of Americans from criticisms of Trump (Sainato 2017).

In this regard, Maines (2017) contends, "The media turned itself into the opposition and Trump won because he cast the media as opposition, or opposed to conservative values and, accordingly, it was voted down". As an oppositional force, the assumption that the mainstream media is beyond fault was brought into question. Although Trump and his advisors have often been exposed as liars, their labelling of the mainstream

media as hypocrites stuck. Mitrovica (2016) asserts that the 2016 debate reminded the mainstream media that it played an undisputed role in selling calamitous wars, which have caused much death and suffering. Much has been written about how *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and other leading mainstream media outlets served as aggressive propagandists in favour of the Iraq War (Sainato 2017). Mitrovica (2016) writes, “Not so long ago, this apparently lie-allergic media titans sold a war armed with the ‘facts’”, which were in essence based on a lie about weapons of mass destruction and Iraq”.

The argument presented makes reference to the academic critique, which maintains that despite the front of credibility presented by mainstream sources, the sector has often been found guilty of slavishly following an elite, neoliberal, and in the case of black audiences, Western and capitalist agenda (Friedman 2011). As such, the mainstream media has been criticised for favouring the upper classes and big business at the expense of ordinary people and the poor. It has been well documented that Trump’s presidential campaign rested, not just on race baiting, but also on an appeal to economic anxiety. Although on opposite ends, in the South African case, this sentiment of the mainstream media’s elitism is best captured by the politician Julius Malema who in 2018 accused the private broadcaster, eNCA, “of perpetuating and defending white privilege” and being a platform that “perpetuates white supremacy”.

Gopnik (2017) opines that what populist politicians are doing is challenging a whole regime of truth as we have come to know it. Critical observers have noted that the mainstream panic over fake news is not limited to its ability to create an echo chamber (Wasserman 2017). When scrutinised, the critique has to be broadened to include the potential of fake news to challenge established conventions. Astute media commentators in the US have said that the spread of misinformation could be a deliberate challenge to traditional power sources. Taking Trump as an example, Gopnik (2017) argues that more than ideological differences, the American President poses a challenge to mainstream sensibilities. Instead of euphemisms, as lies in politics have always been packaged, what has changed about the nature of lies in the “post truth” world is that the disregard for truth is offered “without even the sugar-façade of sweetness of temper or equableness or entertainment” (Gopnik 2017).

Therefore, what seems to have been destroyed in the Brexit/Trump post-truth campaigns is the veil that lies or differences will be purported in an acceptable manner (Mitrovica 2016). With the challenge to euphemism, Oremus (2017) asserts that we have entered an age where the “gloves are off”. Well-mannered ideological disagreements and “sensible” bending of the truth have been replaced by the crudest form of falsehoods. McKaiser (2017) argues that Trump does not fear being exposed for peddling lies because “he, quite literally, peddles bullshit, where bullshit is aimed to create a buffet of nonsense so long as it brings certain outcomes the bullshitter wants”. The significant change that has therefore taken place in the current era of post-truth and fake news is that misinformation is employed blatantly to disrupt the dominant discourse, making it difficult to reel the conversation back to mainstream sensibilities (Gopnik 2017).

For this purpose, Trump has demonstrated that insults and lies can be highly effective because they bulldoze current or popular sentiment. Oremus (2017) argues that when Trump repeats claims about illegal voters, or the size of his inauguration crowd, he does not care if he is believed because that is not the purpose. The real purpose is intimidation. Gopnik (2017) opines that Trump's lies and misinformation tactics are not postmodern traps; "they are primitive schoolyard taunts and threats". Any good insult, Oremus (2017) further argues, is carefully selected to inflict maximum damage on its target. This is the case with mainstream media because Trump has been jabbing at the credibility of the sector, and has been hitting the industry where it hurts (Oremus 2017). At a time when major publications and broadcasters are struggling to distinguish themselves from a flurry of online competitors on the strength of their reporting and editorial standards, the attacks on mainstream media are greatly damaging (Oremus 2017).

In his ongoing duel with mainstream news organisations, Trump's guile has been the appropriation of the label "fake news", which was originally used to describe dubious websites that intentionally deceive, to describe organisations with long histories of "credible" journalism (Ha 2017). Making use of historical flaws and a tendency to be skewed in favour of neoliberal policies, populist leaders such as Trump have branded mainstream media as fake news in order to deliver a certain message to their constituencies (Mitrovica, 2016). Oremus (2017) thus argues that when Sean Spicer calls CNN "fake news", he is changing the subject from Trump's credibility to the media's. With his cries of "fake news" (and, conversely, Kellyanne Conway's defense of lies as "alternative facts"), Trump and his subordinates are giving Americans a simple message, one that he has repeated a number of times: "Believe me – not the media" (Ha 2017).

Social, cultural and political context

Considering the long history of misinformation, it is worth bearing in mind that a socio-political take on "fake news" presents the argument that application of the term in liberal, conservative or radical circles might be ways to dismiss differing positions without fully engaging them (Rousseau 2017). At its worst, fake news is often used as a lazy shorthand for anything differing groups do not like about each other. However, as Wasserman (2017) points out, as good as politicians might be at throwing punches at the mainstream media, the general uptake of fake news is not surprising because, just as the oft maligned tabloids, fake news might offer readers something missing from mainstream media (Wasserman 2017). Similar to tabloids, a news genre that is heavily denigrated by mainstream interlocutors, fake news accounts are known to include far-fetched and fictional stories that are popular among their target audience. Therefore, however vilified these sources of media are, they are often trusted by their readers to provide them with information and resources that are of benefit to their daily lives. Wasserman (2017) argues that this is so because popular culture in general, which is often considered lowly by elites, whether television series, film, soap operas or popular music, has long been seen as a space for alternative political information and education.

Mainstream journalism’s doubts notwithstanding, it is important to investigate the social implications of fake news in instances and contexts of conflict and inequality. Wasserman (2017) argues that for this reason, the phenomenon of “fake news”, the discourses that surround it, and the responses by audiences and the journalistic community have to be understood within particular social, cultural and political contexts. This is to say that news – whether “fake” or “real” – should not be understood outside of the social contexts of production and consumption. As Willems and Mano (2017) argue, the experiences of African audiences and the engagement of users with media are always grounded in particular contexts, worldviews and knowledge systems.

This article seeks to locate the latest expression of “fake news” within the South African social and media landscape. In other words, the phenomenon of fake news will be used to understand how journalistic discourses operate within particular environments and how they produce particular responses that relate directly to specific social and political forces at a given historical juncture.

Contestation in divided societies

Before the current wave of outrage against pandemic-inspired fake news, the author’s interest in the manifestation of fake news in South Africa was sparked by an incident involving the scandal prone ruling African National Congress (ANC). The year 2017 began with a bombshell disclosure that the ANC planned to spend R50 million on a covert campaign targeting opposition parties in the 2016 local government elections. It was alleged that a covert team, dubbed the “War Room”, intended to use a “black ops” operation to derail the electoral campaigns of two leading political parties, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and to set a pro-ANC agenda (Comrie 2017). The campaign included setting up a partisan news site and a chat show, employing the services of social media “influencers”, as well as printing fake opposition party posters (Thamm 2017).

Although South Africa has a long history of misinformation, from apartheid era propaganda to newspeak by then president Jacob Zuma, whose spin machine turned unconstitutional expenditure on his private residence to security upgrades, the big splash made by the headlines gave South Africa its first taste of the current iteration of the phenomenon. With the gates flung open, revelations of the use of misinformation have become a staple feature of the media sphere. In the ensuing maelstrom, British PR firm Bell-Pottinger was forced to abandon a lucrative contract, and to issue an apology to the nation, after accusations that the company was dabbling in fake news. The apology was in response to a complaint filed by the DA, with two professional PR bodies, which accused Bell-Pottinger of “promoting racial hatred in South Africa” in order to protect the interests of its politically connected clients, the Gupta family (Thamm 2017). Critics accused Bell-Pottinger of exploiting racial tensions by disseminating the counter-narrative of “white monopoly capital”; designed to shield the corrupt activities of black elites in power.

The dogged pursuit of the Bell-Pottinger story in mainstream media circles resulted in a massive “dump” of a trove of emails that was termed #GuptaLeaks. The dump gave South Africans a greater purview of not only the extent of the looting of public

entities, but also the extensive use of disinformation by those in power to hide their skulduggery. Given the sheer scope of operations, as confirmed by the #GuptaLeaks, from fake Twitter accounts and partisan websites, to paid protestors and Twitter influencers, it would seem that South Africa was in the throes of an all-out propaganda war. Therefore, the choice of moniker used by the ANC-affiliated “War Room” was interesting considering that it has been argued that the dominant discourse in the South African mainstream public sphere is characterised by war (Rodny-Gumede 2015).

It is also not surprising that this theme of conflict runs through the ANC’s (2017) discussion documents on communication, combatively titled “battle of ideas”. In these documents, the ANC charged that a consolidated media hegemony in South Africa holds an adversarial editorial position against the governing party, and overtly favours the political opposition, who are given space to dominate multiple platforms (ANC 2017). The point made by the ANC is that the media, as a collection of large conglomerates who are historically tied to dominant capital, is not a passive observer but a big player with a stake in the fight. Media scholars have produced research that supports this supposition, arguing that mainstream media “are capable of enacting and performing conflicts as well as reporting and representing them” (Cottle 2006: 9). The emphasis here is on the complex ways in which the media are often implicated in the conflicts they disseminate, and thus cannot be considered as neutral middle ground, or mere reflective surface (Cottle 2006).

The 2012 Marikana massacre, where 34 protesting miners were gunned down by the police, is often used as an example of the proximity of the South African news media to the middle class and economic elite. The dominant theme of reportage in the aftermath of the massacre, as argued by Duncan (2013) in her seminal analysis of the coverage, was mostly concerned with the impact of the strike on the financial viability of the mining sector. Analysis of the news coverage revealed that the most visible sources of news coverage were business, risk assessment firms, and the specialist banking and financial services groups, who were concerned with the impact of the strikes on investor confidence (Duncan 2013). Instead of an attempt by the miners to secure a living wage (given that the formal bargaining structures had failed them), the strike was framed as a violent inter-union rivalry that was damaging an “already struggling economy” (Chauke & Strydom 2012). Although more critical reporting would follow, according to Duncan (2013: 19), the early Marikana coverage was an example of embedded journalism, or journalism acting as “mouthpieces of the rich and powerful”.

The mainstream representation of the conflict was clearly and unashamedly biased towards business, and pushed a narrative that delegitimised the legitimate, but legally unprotected, actions taken by the miners (Duncan 2013). What was constantly reinforced was the latent theme of miners being inherently violent, with the coverage creating a sense that protests comprised of unruly mobs (Rodny-Gumede 2015). In sensationalising the violence, the coverage of the Marikana massacre fits another criticism that has been levelled against news media. The coverage illustrated a well-documented slant towards the sensational, with a clear emphasis on the disruption of business (Rodny-Gumede 2015). As a result, insufficient attention was given to the underlying social issues, which were at the heart of the miners’ discontent. The simple

idea that the protesting was “wildcat”, “violent”, and “frenzied”, instead of a peaceful gathering threatened by the police, was misleading and showed that there was clear bias and adherence to a neoliberal ideology, which emphasises the stability of market relations (Duncan 2013).

In addition to the capitalistic slant, studies in the area of peace journalism have established that there is an overwhelming emphasis on war and conflict in news media. According to Galtung (1986), war journalism has a value bias towards violence and violent groups, which usually leads audiences to overvalue violent responses to conflict and ignore non-violent alternatives (Rodny-Gumede 2015). As such, mainstream media has been criticised for paying more attention to violent conflict than peaceful solutions. This is understood to be the result of well-documented news reporting conventions that focus only on the differences between parties, rather than similarities and progress on common issues. As evidenced by the Marikana massacre reportage, South African mainstream news displays an overemphasis on violence, which is coupled with a lack of context and a disregard for the underlying causes of the conflict (Duncan 2013). In centralising the conflictual nature of social relations, and the assumption that resolution can only be reached when one loses, this type of war journalism focuses on the here and now, ignoring causes and outcomes.

Friedman (2011) has argued that the media tends to avoid reporting on the underlying causes and motivations that drive protests in South Africa and how they relate to a broader disillusionment with the socio-economic dispensation in the country. Writing on scandal, renowned media scholar J.B. Thompson (2000) argues that media representation is not an occurrence on the surface of political life, but is “linked to and symptomatic of some of the most important structural features of modern societies”. Similarly, critics have observed that when it comes to recent phenomena, such as the rise of a political outsider like Donald Trump, we need to focus less on the personal and more on the social issues that have enabled him (Heer 2017). It has been argued that the support garnered by Trump and other populist leaders is the product not just of a freak election or a racist backlash, but inequalities inherent in neoliberal capitalism.

South African historians have noted that apartheid was the outcome of colonialism of a “special type”, where the colonial ruling class, with its white support base on the one hand, and the oppressed colonial majority on the other, fought for the control of resources within a single territory (O’Malley 1987). Due to this history of struggle between different factions of capital, apartheid has been described as in-house “racial capitalism”, which legitimised particular economic, political and social management in racial-ethnic terms (Saul & Gelb 1981). As a result, two distinct and competing nationalisms developed, claiming ownership of land and natural resources; exclusive Afrikaner nationalism, which worked in tandem with British colonialism to uphold a white supremacy, while African nationalism (as represented by the ANC) was envisioned to be inclusive of all races (Muiu 2008). Critics have said that these two strands of nationalism have manifested in the clashing ideological positions that have emerged, which have informed the major debates concerning post-apartheid South Africa (Prinsloo 2014).

Due to the colonial social policies that encouraged the development of separate racial groups to facilitate oppression, South Africa, like many other African states, has been left straddled with bifurcated societies that are home to both the oppressor and marginal groups (Mudimbe 1988). Furthermore, Mamdani's (1996) work has been applied to understand the phenomenon of elite continuity in African contexts, which answers the question of why, instead of reversing a legacy of apartheid spatial planning that deprived many South Africans of stable family lives and access to amenities and employment opportunities, the black post-apartheid government replicated the social policies that had led to the protection of the interests of the wealthy. Mamdani (1996) argues that after independence, African postcolonial states deracialised social institutions but failed to decolonise. As a result, the overthrow of the apartheid regime has meant that there has been the accommodation of a growing black elite into pre-established iniquities (Wasserman & Garman 2012). The other consequence of this development is that South Africa continues to display qualities of a Manichean world (Fanon 1963). Thabo Mbeki (1998), South Africa's second post-apartheid president, characterised the South African economy as consisting of two entities. Mbeki (1998) opined that the economy on one side is a modern one with all the trappings of wealth, while on the other side the poor are illiterate, without skills, and have scant access to basic services like clean water. Because a relative minority of the population are able to participate in the economy, postcolonial scholars have argued it is not surprising to find the existence of parallel universes with different realities in South African society. Subaltern studies, for example, have postulated that differences in capital and lived experience result in separate domains between the elite and "the people"; creating dual political realities that result in social policy being understood differently in different geographical spaces (Paton 2016).

In the wake of what was an unexpected Trump presidency, and a state of heightened social anxiety due to the spread of the coronavirus, such insight seems useful. Observers have pointed out that the media failed to envisage the election results because of the disconnect between the mainstream media and those residing outside metropolitan areas (Ingram 2016). According to Ingram (2016), "Much of the East Coast-based media establishment is arguably out of touch with the largely rural population that voted for Trump, the disenfranchised voters who looked past his cheesy exterior and his penchant for half-truths and heard a message of hope". Thus, what has to register in the media sphere going forward is that due to social differences in an unequal and changing society, the discursive positions offered by various actors are not neutral positions, but viewpoints that are underpinned by assumptions of truth, and are always contested by other views (Prinsloo 2014).

As such, African scholars have insisted on the perspective that incidents of social conflict present an opportunity to examine the kinds of ideological and epistemological contradictions that come with living in a postcolonial/apartheid state (Mbembe 2001). Instead of the insistence on the truth of one public sphere, postcolonial scholars have posited that we have to be open to the fact that there are multiple spheres, and that post-conflict societies are multi-layered. From this perspective, it seems good advice that when grappling with anti-establishment and populist leaders such as Donald

Trump, modern scholarship cannot be mis-categorised as other, but must be seen as a perfectly legitimate political reality that represents an alternate way of being. In such a paradigm, the nature of reality is not as some commentators have intimated an open question in the age of Trump; it is an open question in postmodern and postcolonial societies. Therefore, questions such as what is real and how do we reach consensus on the truth, as asked by commentators such as Jeet Heer (2018), have to be abandoned in favour of accepting the complications of modern life.

Although wary of the fact that identity gaps between groups might be exploited by individuals for personal benefit, this article’s broader aims are shaped less by technical definitions of fake news and the pedagogic impulse of warning against it, and more by understanding the reason some people chose to accept a version of truth over another. The story relayed earlier about the #GuptaLeaks is a case in point. In response to claims that the controversial Gupta family was looting state coffers, the family planned a paid Twitter offensive to defend their interests by offering a counter narrative. The PR campaign designed by Bell-Pottinger presented an alternate version of reality where white monopoly capital was the bigger social threat. Thus, when presented with two versions of the world, it is interesting to ask why people would choose to believe either.

Warning about pseudoscience in healthy eating, Wilson (2017) contends that to understand how clean eating took hold with tenacity, it is necessary to consider the terror food has become for millions of people. As such, Wilson (2017) argues that the interesting question is not whether clean eating is a fad, but why so many intelligent people decided to put their faith in it. The broad answer is that any perspective, no matter how bogus it seems, has the ability to speak a certain kind of truth to a particular set of people.

CONCLUSION

Having reviewed the literature, what this article landed upon is the fact that fake news has in equal measure to do with social divides and disinformation. Instead of seeing fake news as a threat to the health of the news media, the less media-centric and social perspective allowed us to view it as conflict, which is rooted in economic contradictions and political structures, and within differences in social attitudes or cultural outlooks. One of the big takeaways presented is the fact that this current era of misinformation speaks to longstanding social divisions, which are essentially struggles between opposing interests and outlooks driven by economic anxiety and new technologies. If these longstanding social conflicts, made more apparent by fake news, are a reflection of society, this article’s angle on fake news has been to investigate the social conditions that make it optimal for disinformation to prosper. The conclusion reached is that fake news speaks to social fractures, where the disconnect between sections of the population are manifest in parallel communication channels. Therefore, this article invested time in investigating how fake news is more about the social context than the propaganda, and the ways in which we could use the recently instituted “disinformation era” to learn about the nature of contemporary social relations. When analysed closely, this perspective has been a major theme of critical commentary, which has emerged post the 2016 American presidential elections.

In criticising the failure of the Democratic Party to address the anti-establishment sentiment that dominated the polls, pundits have pointed out that in making sense of the social forces that drove Donald Trump to the White House, we need to be highly critical of the social abnormalities developed by power and capital (Frank 2016). In this regard, the American mainstream media has been criticised for its feeble analysis of the fractures in society. Commentators have pointed out that the mischaracterisation of Trump supporters, as driven by racism instead of economic anxiety or a mixture of the two, has allowed insufficient analysis of the greater problems faced by that group, and thus a misreading of their discontent (Frank 2016). Furthermore, critics have highlighted that there was a tendency to demonise Republican supporters, which meant that not enough attention was paid to frayed social relations.

In the end, what has become evident through a review of the available literature is that fake news becomes prominent in a context where divisions have widened. Thus, this article has been an attempt to understand fake news better through these fractured relations. In this attempt to understand the relationship between the media and society, the article has shown critical attention on the fact that it is impossible to talk of peace or consensus in situations where the media ignore underlying social issues that breed conflict. In foregrounding context before technicality, this article advocates for the recognition that in order to make any meaningful social progress, we need to grapple with the consequences of injustice. In the stratified societies we live – the results of decades of strife – it is only when we recognise the multiple perspectives that exist that we can begin to unravel different viewpoints and their merits. Once this is achieved, we can start reporting on differences of opinions, on movements for civil rights, or dissatisfaction with services delivery, and a myriad of other issues that people face. We can begin to see the world from the perspective of all its participants, instead of dismissing either side as fake.

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